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ABSTRACT

Social rhetorics have historically and recently been criticized on ethical grounds. According to Kurt Spellmeyer, Cultural "Constructions of Knowledge" are oppressive and often lead to a betrayal of the individual, while Donald Stewart, is of the opinion that the "excesses" of social construction can lead to a police state, the group mentality. Expressionist critiques carry even more force currently as discussion in rhetoric and composition, cultural studies, and literary theory turns to a renewed interest in agency. Stewart, like Kurt Spellmeyer, links expressionist rhetoric to personal empowerment and freedom, but he is also concerned that social movements are not as benign as their proponents believe. For instance, he notes that the word "collaboration" has troubling links to Nazi Germany, where a collaborator was a person who assisted the Nazis, even to the point of betraying his or her countryman. Stewart is concerned that in the rush to add collaborative theory to the writing classroom, teachers have failed to account for its troubling drawbacks. Expressionists, by their emphasis on writing as an act of self-empowerment and self-knowledge, are trying to free writers from what they see as the overly mechanical restrictions of current traditional rhetoric and the epistemological and moral restrictions of social rhetorics. Expressionist rhetorics' insistence on the self as the source of truth, invites, as Carolyn Miller points out, "anomie and disaffection." Ways to create a practical rhetoric that accounts for the agency of the writer and the agency of the interlocutor in a manner that is ethically, politically, and socially responsible need to continue to be theorized. (Contains 10 references.) (CR)

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The Ethical Excesses of Expressionism:

A Response To Critiques of Social Rhetorics

Social rhetorics have historically and recently been criticized on ethical grounds. For instance, Kurt Spellmeyer argues that cultural "constructions of knowledge" are oppressive and often lead to a betrayal of the individual (48) while Donald Stewart links such violence and betrayal to Nazis Germany when he argues that the "excesses" of social construction can lead to a "police state, the group mentality" (448). These expressionists' critiques carry even more force currently as discussion in rhetoric and composition, cultural studies, and literary theory turns to a renewed interest in agency. Jeffrey Nealon, in the recent College English article, "The Ethics of Dialogue: Bakhtin and Levinas," explains this renewed interest in agency by noting that it "can be seen as a direct response to the decentering of the subject enacted by the first wave of poststructualism" (129). However, a turn to either expressionist or social rhetorics will not adequately respond to our longing for political or moral agency, and recent turns to expressionism will only create potentially violent and oppressive ethical consequences.

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To understand just how expressionist rhetoric can create the very oppressive ethical and rhetorical features it abhors in social rhetorics, we need to first get a sense of the assumptions expressionist rhetorics make about language, reality, the writer, and the art of rhetoric. According to James Berlin in Rhetoric and Reality, most expressionist rhetorics understand reality as a "personal and private construct" (145) where the question of truth lies within one's self and the social world is equated with thoughtless conformity (145). These basic assumptions about the nature of reality and truth yield a range of expressionist rhetorics from anarchism of uninhibited freedom to what Berlin refers to as a "transactional category" (146). This latter category refers to those rhetorics that assume a close interaction between private visions or truths and language. For these rhetorics, language can shape one's private vision (146).

However, this expressionist link between the social and the personal does not mean that expressionists take a social epistemic view of reality which sees the act of writing as a process in which the writer is as much shaped by his/her social, material, ideological, and discourse constraints, as she/he is the shaper of discourse. In fact, social aspects of the writing act such as audience or discourse community constraints or the writer's culture are viewed at best with suspicion and at worst with hostility. This is because expressionist rhetoric recenters composition pedagogy around each individual writer by invoking a model Karen Burke LeFevre refers to as "romantic individualism," which assumes that a unified subject exists and is the point of origin for discourse (17).

Expressionist rhetorics invoke this model of romantic individualism by linking personal writing to the writer's freedom and integrity. According to Joel Haefner, the writer is promised freedom by the formless nature of personal writing (128) and is encouraged to create a space for his/herself and his/her writing by drawing upon the authority of her or his own unique experiences. The writer's integrity depends upon his or her ability to freely access, unmediated, his/her own authority of experience. As a result, many expressionists view social aspects of the writing context such as audience as a threat. For instance, E.B. White writes in The Elements of Style: "the whole duty of the writer is to please and satisfy himself, and the true writer plays to an audience of one. Let him start sniffing the air, or glancing at the Trend Machine, and he is as good as dead, although he may make a nice living" (qtd. in Porter 37).

Kurt Spellmeyer is another example of a theorist who views the social with hostility because he believes that the social can rob an individual of his/her freedom and often morally betrays the individual. In "Writing and Truth: The Decline of Expertise and the Rebirth of Philosophy," Spellmeyer uses excerpts from Tan's The Joy Luck Club and Alice Walker's "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and Partisan View," to illustrate that cultural "constructions of knowledge" are oppressive. Spellmeyer argues that Tan's novel shows how people are often "betrayed by the norms of the society that purports to enoble them and protect them" (98). Here, Spellmeyer is referring to one of the pivotal

scenes in the novel when a poor woman is raped by a noble man and then made into his concubine. This series of events leads to the woman's exile from her family -- as a "fallen" woman she must be disowned. Not only does cultural knowledge and socialization result in overt betrayals, but according to Spellmeyer, it also requires a voluntary suppression of oneself. To break this grip of violence and betrayal, Tan, according to Spellmeyer, advocates replacing well-established moral traditions with compassion.

Spellmeyer then looks at the culture of academic discourse to suggest that academicians are also subject to a similar system of betrayal and suppression. According to Spellmeyer, Alice Walker points to the oppressive nature of academic discourse when she goes against the scholarly norm and expresses a desire to use knowledge for her own purposes. What follows in her biography of Zora Neale Hurston, Spellmeyer argues, is a dialectic with Walker's own self which illustrates that the social context of scholarship privileges "correctness" (100).

Spellmeyer, of course, is not the first and probably not the last to attack social notions of language and knowledge on the grounds of personal freedom and ethical behavior. Donald C. Stewart also raises questions about the moral sensibility of a social approach in "Collaborative Learning and Composition: Boon or Bane?" Stewart accuses social epistemic theorists of being historically naive. He argues that, for instance, Karen Burke LeFevre's critique of

expressionist rhetorics' reliance on "romantic individualism" of the 60's fails to account for the work of expressionist teachers which Stewart explains as:

> a number of us were seizing the occasion to encourage students to find their own voices, to escape from the pasteurized and pedestrian prose they had been conditioned to produce in the traditional classroom. (440)

Here, Stewart links the expressionist approach to writing with freedom and empowerment and even seems to imply that expressionist teachers were fighting a heroic crusade for student empowerment.

Not only does Stewart, like Spellmeyer, link expressionist rhetoric to personal empowerment and freedom, but he is also concerned that social movements are not as benign as their proponents would have us believe. For instance, he notes that the word collaboration has troubling links to Nazi Germany. He explains that during World War II, the word collaborator was used to "describe a person who assisted the Nazis, even to the point of betraying his or her countrymen" (440). Stewart notes that he finds it ironic that "collaboration now has such favorable connotations for some English teachers" (440). Stewart finds this ironic, he illustrates later, because he finds social theories problematic ethically. Stewart is concerned that in the rush to add collaborative theory to the writing classroom, teachers have failed to account for its troubling drawbacks. He concedes that social theories might be a response to the excesses of individualism, but, he argues, that "if individualism has its excesses, so can social constructionism: the police state, the group mentality to

the point at which it eliminates 'non-social' types such as the Jews in Nazi Germany" (448).

Spellmeyer offers a way out of the personal and moral enslavement of the social which both he and Stewart expose. Spellmeyer advocates a return to the self-knowledge described in Plato's comment in the Phaedrus that "philosopher's practice a 'living speech' concerned primarily with the philosopher's own self-understanding" (qtd. in Spellmeyer 97). Further, Spellmeyer believes that current work in postmodernism and deconstruction vindicates Plato's approach since it reveals knowledge to be becoming increasingly "disembedded, appropriated," and partial (105). These postmodern theories, according to Spellmeyer, lead us to understand that knowledge is not a replacement for wisdom (108). As a result, Spellmeyer advocates a return to wisdom which he defines as the philosophical practice of knowing the self.

Basically, Spellmeyer and other expressionists, by their emphasis on writing as an act of self-empowerment and self-knowledge, are trying to free writers from what they see as the overly mechanical restrictions of current-traditional rhetoric and the epistemological and moral restrictions of social rhetorics. In doing so, expressionist rhetorics are advocating an ethics of self-expression.

While Spellmeyer's and Stewart's critiques of social rhetorics are compelling, do their critiques which are grounded on an ethics of self-expression have the potential to save use from the excesses of the social? Their critiques do not save

us, but to understand why not, we need to understand what consequences an ethics of self-expression creates.

An ethics of self-expression with its emphasis on self-knowledge and compassion is tied to an epistemology of liberal individualism. Carolyn Miller elaborates on the ethical consequences of liberal individualism which are at the heart of expressionist rhetoric by referring to the work of the liberal political theorist John Rawls. She explains that a liberal ethical frame allows "individuals to retain a kind of detachment from the community by relying on universalized principles and procedure" (Miller 7). The individuals have rights which free them to create their own beliefs about what is morally good. In other words, according to Rawls, "they regard themselves as self-originating sources of valid claims" (qtd. in Miller 7). One consequence of this liberal frame, according to Miller, is that "while appearing to provide premises for argument in its principles of justice and rights, liberalism promotes anomie and disaffection and ultimately the conviction that reasoned argument is not possible, since each individual is entitled to his or her own conception of the good, incommensurable by definition with everybody else's" (8).

Expressionist rhetorics insistence on the self as the source of truth, invites, as Miller points out, "anomie and disaffection." These consequences, in addition to being prohibitive for moral and civic thinking, raise the specter of dominance and violence -- two consequences that expressionists have sought to avoid by turning to an ethics of the self. Violence and oppression go hand-in-hand with a

liberal individualist position because if every position is right or valid then these positions cannot be weighed critically against one another: pro-life and pro-choice positions are equally valid. However, the individual that holds a pro-life or pro-choice position believes him or herself to be right -- self-evidently right. The tendency, here, then is to impose one's sense of moral rightness on others. By not offering an avenue for discussion and consensus, the very violence that expressionist rhetorics have sought to free themselves from becomes the most likely consequence of moral engagement.

Not only does expressionist rhetorics' reliance on liberal individualism leave violence as a likely avenue of moral debate, but also by not being socially critical, and by implying that rational argument about moral values is not possible, the liberal frame privatizes moral discourse. Philosopher and theologian Celeste Condit notes that this privatization happens because rhetoricians adopt a notion of social community as one where "no one may 'impose their religious views on others,' and where religion is taken as the sole source of morality" (79). This notion of community effectively fosters the assumption that there can be no public discourse about moral debate. So in addition to raising the specter of violence, the ethical consequences of expressionist rhetoric raise the specter of alienated silence.

This failure to account for difference in a meaningful and productive manner is most likely a consequence of expressionist rhetorics' bifurcation of language. James Berlin notes that Ann Berthoff critiques expressionist rhetoric because it

encourages a bifurcation of language use into communicative and expressive aims (148). Communicative language is language used in the public arena; it is rational and empirical (148). Expressive language is language related to the private and emotional (148). As a result, according to Berthoff, expressive language gets divorced from the practical world of affairs (148). Expressive language is cathartic but it doesn't do or change anything (148). In other words, expressive language cannot critique, question, or influence communicative language.

This means that expressionist rhetoric doesn't free us from the specter of Nazism. Spellmeyer and Stewart suggest that by throwing off the social and focusing on the individual the horrors and excesses of Nazism could be avoided. However, Steven Katz illustrates in "The Ethic of Expediency" that Nazism is not linked to a group "mob" mentality (i.e. Stewart's characterization of the social taken to excess), but it is linked to a communicative language that obscures its own horrific material, social, political, ethical, and personal consequences. By removing itself from the social, public arena, expressionist rhetoric has no way of critiquing the communicative language of Nazism. And if the language that allowed Nazism to exist cannot be exposed or critiqued, how can expressionist rhetoricians argue that their emphasis on compassion and the uniqueness of the individual could save us from these consequences?

Since an expressionist approach to rhetoric cannot afford us a theory of agency in a manner that is desirable ethically, we may be tempted to turn back to

social rhetorics as a way of gaining agency in an ethically palatable manner. However, social rhetorics cannot provide this answer entirely either. After all, Spellmeyer and Stewart are both right, the social, too, has troubling ethical consequences. Also, as Jeffrey Nealon points out, "the 'social constructionism vs. essentialism' argument seems an attempt to settle -- rather than open up -- a number of difficult and complex questions" (144). Instead of settling these questions, we, as a field, need to continue to explore questions of agency, knowledge, language, and ethics, and we need to continue to theorize about ways we can create a practical rhetoric that accounts for the agency of the writer and the agency of the interlocutor in a manner that is ethically, politically, and socially responsible.

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